New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

Volume XI, Number 26 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 20, 1950

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews

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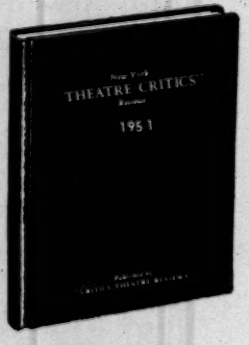

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A Valuable and Authoritative Record of the Contemporary Theatre

"A Story for a Sunday Evening"

The New York Times
November 18, 1950

Paul Crabtree's 'A Story for a Sunday Evening' Is Staged at The Playhouse

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Form: interesting. Material: negligible. In a nutshell, that seems to be the only way to describe "A Story For a Sunday Evening," which was put on at The Playhouse last evening. For Mr. Crabtree, known principally as a director, has written a drama in the form of a theatre rehearsal with a handful of actors and an impromptu production.

Although this approach to playwriting is not completely original, it is fresh and inviting, particularly since Mr. Crabtree's style is informal. As a sort of host, he greets the audience, making some highly appreciated remarks about tardy playgoers. He introduces his associated actors and he carries through the entire performance in the spirit of an improvisation.

* * *

There is no better way of making friends with an audience and creating a mood of tolerant expectation. But there are some harsh facts about the theatre, and one of them is that expectations have to be fulfilled. The harsh fact about "A Story For a Sunday Evening" is that Mr. Crabtree does not have much to say.

He has written a story about a young actor who falls in love with a young actress and marries her. After a year or two of married life he also falls in love with another young actress. Eventually he has to choose between them.

This is a remarkably perfunctory story. And it must be confessed that Mr. Crabtree's literary style is perfunctory, also. Nothing about the drama is either sturdy or penetrating enough to sustain the succession of playful interruptions when Mr. Crabtree and his actors discuss the plot and the characters.

If we are to accept "A Story For a Sunday Evening" as an improvised drama, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that the material is negligible. If we are to accept it as a theatre lark, the humor is sophomoric. Many of us would like to see another play in the shirtsleeves style Mr. Crabtree is exploiting. But it will have to have some of the intellectual agility of Pirandello or the imaginative richness of Wilder. Only an inspired writer can survive without the support of formal craftsmanship.

* * *

More than that: you need forceful and versatile actors. If the materials are negligible, the actors must be all the more inventive. Mr. Crabtree has the support of one actor who measures up to the occasion. As a boorish, scornful stage manager, Henry Jones is experienced and trenchant enough to make his part count in terms of entertainment. He can fill in the blank places in the script with drolleries out of his own craftsmanship. But it is to be feared that Mr. Crabtree and his other associates are not equal to the occasion. Their informality is really informal. Even informality has to be acted on the stage.

"A STORY FOR A SUNDAY EVENING"

Play by Paul Crabtree; staged by Mr. Crabtree; settings by Theodore Cooper; costumes by Patricia Montgomery; presented by Trio Productions and Milo Thomas 1st at the Playhouse Theatre, November 17, 1950. The cast:

Stage Manager.....Henry Jones
David.....Paul Crabtree
Evelyn.....Cloris Leachman
Beatrice.....Nan Martin
Electrician.....Thomas J. King

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 18, 1950

'Sunday Evening' Opens at Playhouse

Technique of Asides to Audience Used

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Light.
Topic—Young marriage.
Method—Parlor charade.
Debit—Formlessness.
Failing—Triteness.
I find it—Ineffective.

If plays were made in "story conferences," the way moving pictures are, "A Story for a Sunday Evening" would resemble an early meeting about dramatizing the near crackup of a young marriage.

It is revealed with a multitude of asides to the audience, scene shifts in plain sight, and alterations of script and editing by the actors, when they don't like the fable's progress. The audience is not granted this last privilege.

There is nothing malicious or harmful about this work. What Paul Crabtree, the author, has done is decide that the risks of young wedded love are dramatic material. If he had, in incident, character or dialogue, added any distinction to this idea, he might have been right.

Lonely Divorcees.

But all he has said is that a hopeful playwright can find short finances and a baby dull, when he meets lonely divorced actresses in exotic slacks, with martinis, and soft jazz records. And also that a wife who can buy carpet from household budgets, is worth sticking to.

What Mr. Crabtree, the actor, has done, is design for himself a role which has every suggestion of being wishfully autobiographical. The playwright (in the play) is a homely type smarting from allegations of genius, who constantly eavesdrops on a couple of women fighting over him.

Mr. Crabtree, the director, has staged this work in the only way possible, like a prolonged vaudeville sketch. What story line there is, he delivers to the house in chummy intimacies over the footlights, while stagehands are shifting props and flats, or the two girls are shifting costumes.

There's a Tradition.

There is a tradition for improvisatory theater, but the artful illusion of spontaneity is difficult to create, and more so to sustain. In this case the effect of the play's being impromptu is absolute. One longs for an artificial, well made, meticulously edited passage that might add up to effective theater.

Instead one gets consistent casualness and raggedy craftmanship. The deliberate simplicity gradually becomes overpowering pretentiousness.

Cloris Leachman, who plays the wife, comes out of the project with what vagrant honors there are. It is often confusing to remember that she had been introduced as the wife, in real life, of David, the playwright in the play, who, in the play within the play, tells of his own married life. Miss Leachman is an accomplished young comedienne, who before this has given plays real bounce when they had no innate rise or fall.

Adds Some Life.

Here she is the only character who ever changes attitude, and when she loses her temper or ruminates over old jokes, the evening comes alive as it never does otherwise.

As actor, Mr. Crabtree is usually intent on seeming to be himself. He reveals enough sense of timing and imagination, on occasion, to impersonate something more interesting.

Nan Martin is willing but unfulfilling as the actress who lures the playwright. Henry Jones is a stage manager who fills in for all minor missing Equity members at this alleged rehearsal. He has one challenging scene when he must impersonate all the guests at a cocktail party, represented by dressmaker's dummies. This resembles a none too happy night club turn. Mr. Jones can be funnier and will.

Sergeant Unlisted.

There is listed in the cast an Electrician, who has one speech, and there appears in the play, unlisted in the cast, a personable Army sergeant, with two speeches, who is used by Miss Leachman to make Mr. Crabtree jealous.

One of the evening's remarkable events is Miss Martin's appearance in a costume, fugitive from El Morocco, of black and white imitation tiger skin, which looks as if it were not so much designed for television, as being seen on television.

Daily Mirror

November 18, 1950

'Sunday Evening' Is Light But Pleasant Fare

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Paul Crabtree is one of our more promising young men of the theatre. He is at once actor, author, director and producer. He has turned in a number of excellent jobs in these capacities for the Theatre Guild and the Westport Country Playhouse.

Last evening he demonstrated his remarkable versatility by presenting, with Trio Productions and Milo Thomas, "A Story for a Sunday Evening" which he wrote, directed and acts in, at the Playhouse.

"A Story for a Sunday Evening" is a pleasant though pretty thin, retelling of the eternal triangle. A playwright pens a script about himself, torn between love for a practical wife and a desire to spend more exciting nights with a siren in search for a fat part in a Broadway play.

Naturally, the jealous wife pretends to have an affair with a former college beau. But the pretense is dropped by the final curtain in time for what most conventional people would consider a happy ending. Wife, baby and shabby home win out over actress with chic wardrobe and smart apartment.

This familiar little plot is projected with notable invention and humor. As the audience enters the Playhouse, the curtain is up on an almost bare stage. As the auditorium fills, Crabtree, cast as the playwright, saunters leisurely to the footlights and comments amiably upon the habits of first-nighters, particularly late-comers.

He then introduces the stage manager, and, gradually, the other members of the cast. This is all done informally and ingratiatingly. The method, of course, is not exactly new. It's been used in "Our Town" and, more recently, in "The Country Girl." But Crabtree gives it a friendly freshness.

Cloris Leachman, as the wife, and Nan Martin, as the seductive actress are attractive. Henry Jones etches the stage manager with a wry, satiric manner that is effective. Miss Martin, a former model; is making her Broadway bow. She is tall, willowy and exotic. Quite easy on the eyes.

"A Story for a Sunday Evening" has moments of unpretentious charm and originality, but not enough, we think, to stand favorable comparison with the season's more sturdy arrivals. A majority of first nighters applauded often and appreciatively, but we were able to share their enthuiasm but infrequently. It was for us too skimpy a serving of make-believe to provide a full evening's entertainment.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

November 19, 1950

The Triple-Threat of Mr. Crabtree

By Richard Watts Jr.

Paul Crabtree, the Theatre Guild's bright young man, is, naturally enough, not one to go about hiding his light under any bushels, and, at the Playhouse Friday night, he was to be encountered striving valiantly as dramatist, director and leading man. The upshot of this triple-threat activity is an informal kind of play called "A Story for a Sunday Evening," and it indicates that Mr. Crabtree has talent in all of his chosen fields of endeavor, but hasn't quite the coordination required to bring off a difficult feat triumphantly.

As all the advance reports had advised us, "A Story for a Sunday Evening" goes in for ideas that have been made famous by such celebrated works as "Our Town" and "Six Characters in Search of an Author." There are also moments when it suggests a night club show. To be more clear about it, the action takes place on a bare stage, with only some props to set the scene; the plot deals with the rehearsal of a play in which the actors rewrite their own parts, and, in one episode, a player impersonates all the people at a cocktail party.

Tour-de-Force

Some of it is amusing and some is rather charming, but there is always present the feeling that the informal charade technique and all the trimmings are chiefly employed to give length and breadth to an extremely thin narrative. The whole thing is the sort of tour-de-force that demands vast wit, dexterity and virtuosity to make it work, and, while Mr. Crabtree reveals occasional insight and imagination, he hasn't yet the brilliance and inventiveness that are so imperative in the manipulation of what is frankly a theatrical stunt.

It all begins with Mr. Crabtree telling the audience that he is going to try out some scenes from a play he is writing. His narrative is the reasonably familiar one of the young playwright, striving for Broadway success, who finds himself entangled between his devotion to his actress wife and his love for a handsome leading woman who feels that the wife doesn't appreciate him. I might note that, among other things, Mr. Crabtree has written himself a part which shows the two young ladies devoting a lot of their time to kissing him.

Play Within Play

What gives the slender narrative its point is that it is all told in terms of the play which is being rehearsed and that the characters are sometimes actors in the rehearsed play and sometimes the people the dramatist is writing about. They keep interfering in the story to tell him where he has gone wrong about them and to arrange things correctly for him. There is also the character of the stage manager who appears as all sorts of people, from George Abbott to those guests and hosts at the cocktail party. I must confess that, on the stage, it isn't as complicated as I perhaps have made it seem here.

Mr. Crabtree, who once gave a notable performance in "The Iceman Cometh," is somewhat more successful as actor and director than as playwright. That oncoming young actress, Cloris Leachman, is charming and reveals skill as a comedienne in the role of the wife, and an interesting newcomer named Nan Martin is attractive as the temptress. Henry Jones, an actor with a comic gift, is of great help as the harried stage manager. "A Story for a Sunday Evening" has moments of interesting promise, but, on the whole, it is just a hopeful and ineffectual charade.

"BEST PLAYS OF 1949-1950"

Selection of the ten best in the now published 1949-1950 volume of "The Burns Mantle Best Plays of 1949-1950", edited by John Chapman, is:

"The Cocktail Party"	"The Happy Time"
"The Member of the Wedding"	"The Wisteria Trees"
"The Innocents"	"I Know My Love"
"Lost in the Stars"	"The Enchanted"
"Come Back, Little Sheba"	"Clutterbuck"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

November 18, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

No Tale at All

A RUNT of a dramatic idea has been decked out in pretended improvisation at the Playhouse. "A Story for a Sunday Evening", by Paul Crabtree, imagines a play being rehearsed within a play with the auhtor acting as a narrator. It is presented on a largely vacant stage, which is quite appropriate to the subject matter. Aside from a few wisps of amusement and romantic melodrama, the work is pointless and tiresome. The affected casualness of the proceedings might have proved highly effective had they had any substance. As it is there is more than a little effrontery in Crabtree's having the audience participate in his heavy-handed whatnot.

It is very much a one-man show, with the playwright assuming the leading role, tending to what direction there is to be found in the doings, and even moving the props around on occasion. He has written himself quite a part, both as the author of the drama within a drama and as a fellow who keeps two women swooning for him on both levels of the piece's exposition. He has a pleasant diffidence at times, but he is scarcely the type to have a couple of actresses clawing at each other for his affection. Since most of his lines and situations are incredibly trite, his performance is not helped by the script.

Head and shoulders above him in catching the mood of "A Story for a Sunday Evening" is Cloris Leachman, who is frequently very fine as the on-stage and off-stage wife who has to battle with another woman in both circumstances. She handles the abrupt breaks in the rehearsal with conviction and considerable feeling, even when she has to collaborate on a bit of tomfoolery which has a sergeant wandering into the play and then taking his place among the customers. Once picked as "Miss Chicago," she does credit to the Windy City.

* * *

Henry Jones has the thankless role of the stage manager in the run-through of an unfinished play and does what he can with the material at his disposal. He almost succeeds in being really funny in a cocktail scene peopled with dressmaker and show-window dummies in which he scurries around reading all the parts. Nan Martin strikes embarrassing poses as the wrong point of a triangle and Thomas J. King has about one line as an electrician. The latter is lucky. Crabtree has written very little of dramatic quality and the tricks of his staging are too transparent for more than a moment of quickening interest. A great deal of talent is needed to back up improvisation, whether it is real or supposed. "A Story for a Sunday Evening" has almost none.

Journal American

November 18, 1950

Everything's Too Tricky

By JOHN McCLAIN

Some gentlemen who bill themselves as "Trio Productions and Milo Thomas, 1st" unveiled at the Playhouse Theatre last night a new drama by Paul Crabtree called "A Story for a Sunday Evening."

I will not at this point go into why Milo Thomas chooses to give himself this singular title of "1st" or why they arrived at the cumbersome name for the play—thus setting themselves up for all the people who are bound to say, "It should last so long?"

But perhaps this is all part of what I thought was the basic trouble with the effort. The whole thing is too tricky.

There is no curtain. The house lights go down and some men come out and put some furniture on the stage and then Mr. Crabtree, both author and actor, sets the festivities in motion. He tells the audience he has written a play and they are going to see just how it goes.

There is his leading lady, Cloris Leachman, and there is the supporting actress, Nan Martin, and the stage manager, Henry Jones.

Gets Out of Hand

That was all completely comprehensible, in a sort of "Our Town" way, but it seemed to me that everything got a bit out of hand when in the midst of the play-within-a-play the author would suddenly step out of the part he was playing to explain that what he had just said was not actually what he wrote but the result of what he felt when he was enacting his role with Miss Martin.

It is a sort of three-dimensional confusion: Crabtree has written the play, he also is in it as a player, and I was constantly puzzled to determine where one left off and the other began. There also is the fact, accounting for the third dimension, that he wrote "A Story for a Sunday Evening," the play-within-a-play-within-a-play which I was viewing.

This sounds small and irascible, and I don't mean it to be, for there is a solidly well-written scene wherein Crabtree returns from some dalliance with Miss Martin and provokes a quarrel with Miss Leachman born entirely of his own guilt, and there are sincere and capable performances by the three principals and Mr. Jones, the stage manager, all along the line.

A Sincere Try

Even at the end, when I was almost hopelessly confused, I found myself moved to see that the hero got back with the heroine, despite his excursion to leeward and the fact that I knew he would from the moment they came onstage. Here and there it must have been well written.

More will be heard, I believe, from Paul Crabtree. This is a sincere and ambitious try and I think he has a good gift for dialogue. He also is a most engaging stage personality.

The story he chose to tell last night is almost too thin to bear summation: Man has quick fling with Other Woman, man suspects that wife might have been having quick fling too, man returns to wife for keeps.

I think all concerned—even Mr. Milo Thomas 1st—did the most with the least. But I regret to report that I do not think their association, in this vapid venture, will be long lived.

DAILY NEWS

November 18, 1950

'Sunday Evening' a Mild Comedy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Paul Crabtree, who is talented and stage-struck, has written and directed and is playing the leading role in an interesting little comedy, "A Story for a Sunday Evening," which had its first performance last night at the Playhouse. I wish I could do better than say the play is a "little" comedy, for it has originality and humor and these qualities should have the highest praise. But "A Story for a Sunday Evening" is pretty thin; Mr. Crabtree's enthusiasm for the commedia dell' arte form of theatrical improvisation outreaches his powers of invention.

It is the author-director-actor's conceit to have a group of amateurs take over a playhouse on its free, or Sunday, night. They have invited an audience of friends and they start to run through a play about Boy, Girl and Other Woman. They have no scenery and they have had no rehearsal, so they beg the audience's pardon in advance and then launch upon a ragged performance of a play by an inexperienced dramatist. Real life—the conflict between the actors' true personalities—keeps nosing into the play and upsetting the plot.

The performance is put on on a bare stage with a few hand-carried props. In the play-within-the-play Mr. Crabtree is married to Cloris Leachman—as he also happens to be in real life. Nan Martin plays the other woman, and as the performance goes on she becomes the other woman in real life. It's a nice idea, but Mr. Crabtree has been compelled to spread it too thin.

Fine New Comedienne.

The best thing about the new play is the performance of Miss Leachman as the young wife. Here is a new comedienne of charm and promise—a girl who instinctively knows how to fetch a laugh. Next-to-best is a scene in which dressmaker's dummies, a pair of hatracks and a store-window mannequin are employed to represent people at a cocktail party. A stage manager—nicely played by Henry Jones—reads all the parts from his prompt script, giving an amusing slant on cocktail party small-talk. Miss Martin is more handsome than gifted as the other woman.

I think the trouble with "A Story for a Sunday Evening" is that there is too little difference between its characters as play-actors and as real-life people. Whether they are acting out their parts on a makeshift stage or are just being themselves, they seem make-believe — and this defeats what Mr. Crabtree was trying to do.

Mr. Crabtree's own performance, as a stumbling young playwright trying to make himself and others stick to the script, is an engaging one—and his humor, both as a writer and as a director, is intelligent. But his play lacks the bounce and drive it should have; it's just a nice little comedy. Well, anyhow, it strives to be original, and it does bring Miss Leachman to Broadway's attention.

"Bell, Book and Candle"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 15, 1950

Lovely Witch Brews Enchanting Comedy

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Enchanting comedy.
Topic—A witch in love.
Mood—Spritely.

Cast—Fiendishly good.
I find it—Super; naturally delightful.

It is unlikely that you will ever find a happier meeting of talents than is collected for "Bell, Book and Candle." John Van Druten has written one more of his delicious comedies on that peculiarly warm and sophisticated level that is nowadays his alone. And Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer cast over it just the spell it deserves, with their shrewd, winning performances at the head of a perfect cast.

Van Druten is never one to belabor ideas. Here he is so casual about a preposterous notion that you end up as convinced of its disturbing reality as you might be of a throbbing tooth. Placidly he has announced that there are witches at work. Before the evening is over you start suspecting some of your best friends.

Pretty Witch.

The uncommonly attractive witch played by Miss Palmer is far too modern and alluring to need a broomstick. She amuses herself with spells, and making people do things to suit her, chiefly through the agency of a cooperative Siamese cat named Pyewacket.

Her brother is a witch, too, and so is her aunt. They all know they can neither blush nor cry, and they understand that while sex may be permissible, really falling in love will annul their power.

If in her witchery, Miss Palmer was more crone and less wolfbait, things might not be so complicated. She notices an attractive fellow upstairs, who she discovers is almost engaged to a girl she hated in boarding school. In nothing flat she has him so short circuited that he is good for little beyond modeling in levitation acts.

Fatal Error.

While he is dazedly answering her alluring beck and call, she makes the fatal mistake of finding him too attractive.

From being so sure of herself, she is suddenly frantic with fear that her subject will discover his affection for her is not so spontaneous after all. She runs up against the rival craft of both her brother and her aunt, minor wizards except when pitted against lovelorn sorcery.

All this, and its solution, are told with a sort of offhand wit that makes the fable magnetic.

Mr. Harrison plays the bewildered hero with magnificent, crisp deftness. This is high comedy in a crystalline style, precise and always alive, never fussy and never laggard.

Acting With a Lift.

It is certainly a tribute to Mr. and Mrs. Harrison (Miss Palmer) that they can convey such a sense of discovery and compulsion in their stage love affair.

As a girl with an unearthly attraction, Miss Palmer is as warmly winning as you expect her to be. She plays with a lilt that matches the lyrical bounce of the play.

Jean Adair is a pure joy as the fluttery aunt who loves witchery but can't make street traffic do her bidding. And Scott McKay has just the right tone of impertinence and youthful enthusiasm for the brother. As an unhexed author who noses around strange cauldrons, Larry Gates is splendid, and so, for that matter is Pyewacket, who even mews on cue.

The set is in exact tone with the play, and the clothes are characteristically becoming. Mr. Van Druten knows just what he wants from direction, and gets it.

In fact the only thing about the evening I found displeasing was intermission. This company is far too good to walk out on or have to wait for.

"BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE"

Comedy by John van Druten; staged by Mr. van Druten; settings by George Jenkins; presented by Irene Mayer Selznick at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, November 14, 1950. The cast:

Gillian Holroyd... Lilli Palmer
Shepherd Henderson..... Rex Harrison
Miss Holroyd..... Jean Adair
Nicky Holroyd.... Scott McKay
Sidney Redlitch.... Larry Gates

Synopsis: The action passes throughout in Gillian Holroyd's apartment in the Murray Hill district of New York City, in the present. Act I, Scene 1. Christmas Eve. Scene 2. About three hours later. Act II. Two weeks later. Act III, Scene 1. Four hours later. Scene 2. Two months later.

DAILY NEWS

November 15, 1950

In 'Bell, Book and Candle' Palmer Bewitches Harrison—but Natch!

By JOHN CHAPMAN

As long as the League of New York Theatres is expanding, setting up new departments of propaganda and faith, it might as well name John van Druten its official Cupid, for this playwright is at his best when he is making Boy and Girl fall into a clutch or onto a couch.

His best work in this department was "The Voice of the Turtle," of happy memory. His newest, "Bell, Book and Candle," which was revealed last evening to all of producer Irene M. Selznick's Hollywood friends at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, is his next-best work in the Cupid department—and a very pleasant and humorous lot of nonsense.

"Bell, Book and Candle" is about a real witch who bewitches a handsome publisher right here and now on the slopes of Murray Hill, where my office is. Nothing like it ever happened to me, but I wouldn't mind if it did—for the witch is Miss Lilli Palmer. The handsome publisher whom she enchants is Rex Harrison, against whose suavity I would have no chance. In the comedy Mr. Harrison and Miss Palmer fall into clutches and onto couches with such ease, and do such real meat-and-potatoes jobs of kissing, that it is reassuring to know that they are married in real life. Most co-stars don't like each other that much.

The Trouble With Witchery.

Mr. van Druten's little fable is as old as mythology, being about deities or other supernatural beings who lose their magical powers once they fall in love. Miss Palmer is a first-class practicing witch on Murray Hill. She has a Siamese cat which is her "familiar." She has potions and incantations. Out of sheer witchery, just to revenge herself upon an old college chum whom she hates, she forces Mr. Harrison to abandon his engagement to this old college chum and to fall in love with herself in about thirty seconds. Next thing she knows, she is really in love with Mr. Harrison, and her powers as a sorceress are taken from her in punishment. Since, even as a plain human, she is a very attractive dish, she gets along all right.

Stories like this range all the way from Wagner to Gilbert and Sullivan, and among them Mr. van Druten's is slightest—but most of it is good, naughty fun and Miss Palmer and Mr. Harrison play it lightly and delightfully. They are smooth comedians, and even to watch Miss Palmer move across the stage comes under the heading of pleasure.

A Worthwhile Seance.

The first two acts are the best, and by the third act, when Miss Palmer has been reduced to mere humanity, Mr. van Druten seems to have run out of invention. But there is enough in the whole play, what with the acting and some nice, smart lines, to make "Bell, Book and Candle" a very enjoyable seance.

The principals are assisted by Jean Adair, who is amusing as an elderly witch, and Scott McKay, who portrays a handsome young one. (The male witch, by the way, is called a warlock.) Larry Gates comes in a couple of times as a liquor-loving writer. There is a nice setting by George Jenkins. Mr. van Druten directed.

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HOME NEWS
November 15, 1950

The Private Life of a Witch

By Richard Watts Jr.

Being as erudite as he is urbane in his playwriting, John van Druten has given us a jaunty modern comedy about witchcraft. It is called "Bell, Book and Candle," and it was presented last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre by an expert cast headed by Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer, who are themselves pretty skillful in stage witchery. It is so attractively acted, and Irene Selznick has given it such a smooth and artful production, that I find myself putting off as long as possible the ungracious report that the new play collapses rather seriously after a fine beginning. I only wish that it kept up to level of the first act.

Indeed, it strikes me that Mr. van Druten is a more persuasive propagandist on behalf of witchcraft than he probably realizes. At least, his comedy is fresh and delightful as long as his heroine is practicing her sorcery with the gayest of good-humored malice, but begins to decline in imagination and sprightliness the moment she falls in love and thereby loses her ability to cast spells. The unintentional moral of "Bell, Book and Candle" seems to be that a youthful and beautiful witch is a lot of fun to have around the house, but a reformed sorceress in love tends to become a little tedious.

The First Act

Mr. van Druten's first act is as bright, charming and thoroughly engaging as any playwright or audience could hope for, and seems to promise the most delightful things to come. Just as one is settling back comfortably, however, and anticipating an evening of rare theatrical pleasure, the freshness and inventiveness start to disappear, and the play changes into a kind of repetition of the formula of "The Voice of the Turtle," without the notable resourcefulness of that justifiably successful comedy. The knowing deftness of Mr. Harrison and Miss Palmer keeps things going to a certain extent, but not, I fear, enough.

It is certainly a pleasant comic idea to introduce a handsome young lady, living in an attractive Murray Hill apartment and romantically admiring the dashing publisher on the floor above, and then reveal to you slyly that she is a modern witch who can win the gentleman upstairs at will and make him forget all his other problems, including his presumably unpleasant fiancee. The author manages his evocation of contemporary black magic with wonderful deftness, but, having established a mood and a situation with the engaging freshness to be expected of John van Druten, he doesn't appear to know what to do with them.

Marking Time

Certainly "Bell, Book and Candle" never becomes anything approaching a botch. Mr. van Druten is too literate and competent a playwright, with too much gift for gracefully humorous dialogue, for anything as desperate as that to happen to him. To that end, his comedy has moments of humor and charm, and it never ceases to be likeable. But it does grow surprisingly routine and uneventful, and there is present the uncomfortable feeling that a good playwright is at a loss about what to do with his idea and is chiefly marking time until it is late enough for him to bring down his final curtain.

Everyone in the theatre knows what charming and brilliant players Mr. Harrison and Miss Palmer are, and they act together with a grace and ease reminiscent of the youthful days of the Lunts or of Herbert Marshall and Edna Best when they were appearing as a team. They perform wonders for Mr. van Druten, but there just isn't enough for them to work on. Jean Adair and Scott McKay are excellent as debonair members of the witch cult, and so is Larry Gates as a harried expert on sorcery. George Jenkins has provided an admirable set, and, as I have said, the entire production is expert. But the play does sag after its notable start.

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November 15, 1950

Evening Well-Spent At an Engaging Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

It is extremely ambitious to present, as the premise of a play, the fact that a normal young man living in the Murray Hill section of present-day New York can fall prey to the supernatural powers of an attractive young woman who lives on the floor below and is, actually, a witch.

But it is a tribute to John van Druten, the author, and Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer and the other actors and technicians involved in the production of "Bell, Book and Candle" that, as the evening wears on, this situation becomes feasible and funny.

The entire auspices are a happy union of true professionals. Mr. van Druten writes a fine line and in Mr. Harrison and Miss Palmer, Jean Adair, Scott McKay and Larry Gates he fields a team that can be depended upon to get the most from the least. The least being, in my opinion, the fact that it is a somewhat meagre and tenuous idea to begin with.

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Spell Is Cast

The festivities, as unveiled at the Ethel Barrymore theatre last night, proceed something like this:

Miss Palmer, the witch, is the landlady of an attraticve apartment building in which Mr. Harrison has the suite directly above. Through her strange powers she arranges a meeting.

Even though he is engaged to someone else, a college enemy of her, she is able to cast a spell over him and abort the ensuing nuptials. I will not confuse you with such incidentals as the fact that her aunt, another tenant, is also a witch or that her brother, Nicky, is likewise.

The fact is that Rex loves Lilli madly, until the inevitable moment when he discovers that he has been bewitched and has actually been thrashing around in a daze for days. But now, too late, Lilli realizes she **really** loves him and that, at the same time, her pedestrian behavior has robbed her of the unearthly authority to control the romance.

Don't fret. They get together in the end.

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Team a Natural

This whole thing is an entirely engaging evening, for my mooiah. The author has taken a wisp of an idea and through the careful connivance of words, and the superb and convincing performances of Mr. Harrison and Miss Palmer, expanded it into a couple of hours of delightful make-believe.

I think it drooped slightly for a few minutes in the second act, but there is no doubt that it finishes strong. I am even now looking askance at some of my friends who have been close to slightly strange incidents in my own life.

The team of Harrison and Palmer, mere et pere, is a natural. He is among our most gifted bearers of the bright and brittle bon mot and it is a relief to see him cast thus, unburdened by the heavy apparel of the character parts he's played recently. She, at the same time, emerges seductively and in good grace under the auspices of Mr. van Druten's dialogue and Miss Valentina's gowns.

Of the single set, by George Jenkins, I can only say that if anything happens to the play in the near future, which is improbable, I shall be glad to move in and make the stage my home.

Don't worry about the bedroom, I'll just sleep on the couch.